

by deliberately frustrating their ability to choose. Interactivity for Marche and Short is not a vehicle for empowerment, but a way of asking readers to act out intractable problems: to have them navigate the ethical terrain of a particularly difficult day in someone else's life or to throw them into the communicative difficulties of a world where human and machine intelligence have become increasingly interwoven. The most fascinating interactive fiction being written today does not do what Bolter or Landow predicted it would. Instead, it does what literature has always done: it finds new ways to bring readers more directly in contact with what it means to be alive in their place and time.

## Chapter 8

# Literature in the Digital Master Medium

It took many decades for the computer to develop into an expressive medium. The first computers were entirely unfit to serve as carriers of artistic expression: the only inputs they could understand were numerical, and the only operations they could perform were mathematical. With the development of standards like ASCII, text was the first expressive modality to go digital. In short order, textual artistic forms such as Interactive Fiction and hypertext emerged and took advantage of the unique expressive properties of the digital medium. It took much longer to devise means of representing the expressive modalities of music, images, and moving pictures. When such methods were finally perfected and popularized, from the 1990s onward, the computer became something more than merely another expressive medium. It became a master medium.

In 1985, Friedrich Kittler prophesied a time when "for the first time in history or for the end of history," "people will be connected to a communication channel which can be used for any kind of media."<sup>1</sup> "When films, music, phone calls, and texts are able to reach the individual household via fiber optic cables," he wrote, "the previously separate media of television, radio, telephone, and mail will become a single medium."<sup>2</sup> Kittler did not have to wait long for such a medium to come into being: the World Wide Web, developed in the early 1990s and still rapidly expanding, was exactly the communication channel he imagined. Capitalizing on developments in audio, image, and video compression, the development of graphical web browsers, and the increasing bandwidth of high-speed and dial-up connections, the Web was the first widely accessible carrier of the digital master medium. In *The Language of New Media* (2001), Lev Manovich wrote, "Today we are witnessing the emergence of a new medium – the meta-medium of the digital computer": "graphics, moving images, sounds, shapes, spaces, and texts have become computable; that is, they comprise simply another set of computer data."<sup>3</sup>

As the computer has transitioned from a device capable of transmitting only numbers and text to one able to carry multiple modalities, it has increasingly brought into question the notion of "literariness." In *Electronic Literature:*

*New Horizons for the Literary* (2008), Katherine Hayles divides the history of born-digital fiction into two “generations.” First-generation works, beginning with Interactive Fiction in the 1970s, tended to be composed of blocks of text, with limited graphics, animations, colors, and sound. In contrast, the second-generation works that began to appear around 1995 took full advantage of the multimodal possibilities of the Web. If the hypertext link was the defining feature of first-generation born-digital texts, Hayles argues, then second-generation works, with their “wide variety of navigation schemes and interface metaphors,” are defined only by their lack of a defining feature.<sup>4</sup> As co-editor of the first volume of the *Electronic Literature Collection* (2006)<sup>5</sup> – the first major anthology of born-digital fiction – Hayles was confronted with the greatest definitional dilemma posed by second-generation born-digital works: their often tenuous relationship to that most fundamental of literary modalities, text. “Created and performed within a context of networked and programmable media,” Hayles writes, such second-generation texts were informed not only by literature but also by “computer games, films, animations, digital arts, graphic design, and electronic visual culture.”<sup>6</sup> Although Hayles included a number of text-based works, such as Short’s *Galatea*, in the collection, nearly all works incorporated some visual effects, most included sound, and a third of them had no words at all.<sup>7</sup> By calling such works “electronic literature,” Hayles and her fellow editors sought to challenge that word’s text-centric definition. Rather than limiting ourselves to “literature” – works made up primarily of text – Hayles proposes a shift in focus to the concept of “the literary,” a broad category that includes “creative artworks that interrogate the histories, contexts, and productions of literature,” and not only those that practice “the verbal art of literature proper.”<sup>8</sup>

This chapter takes up Hayles’s challenge. How are multimodal forms forcing us to reevaluate literature and the literary? What happens to the traditional literary modality, text, when it is incorporated into one of Hayles’s second-generation born-digital texts? Is it really possible to integrate a form like literature – a form that usually requires slow, careful, close reading – into a noisy, colorful, flickering space combining music and moving images, or do such environments overwhelm the literary experience? If we accept McLuhan’s basic premise that the medium affects the user more profoundly than the message it carries, how might multimodal literary forms reshape the consciousnesses of their readers? We begin by looking at two born-digital texts that insert themselves determinedly into the literary tradition: *Inanimate Alice* by Kate Pullinger and Chris Joseph, and *Dakota* by Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries. Although clearly “literary” in Hayles’s terms, both texts use the resources of electronic literature to question the very possibility of electronic

literature. These works’ manifest discomfort with their own forms opens the way for the second part of the chapter, which asks whether we should look elsewhere for the survival of the literary impulse in the digital age – to videogames, a form that bears little conscious relation to literature and thus falls outside Hayles’s definition of the “literary.” Are *videogames* literature? Simply to pose the question is to feel how fundamentally the digital age is forcing us to reconsider our notions of literature and the literary.

### Harmony among the Art Forms: the Prehistory of Digital Multimodality

As with so many topics encountered in this book, the multimodality of artistic expression is not so novel as it may at first appear. Hayles’s second-generation electronic texts were by no means the first to pursue the status of a “meta-medium” – to seek to combine in a single form “graphics, moving images, sounds, shapes, spaces, and texts.” Indeed, that honor belongs to the opera, a 500-year-old medium that envisioned itself as the re-creation of an artistic form much older still. Opera’s multimodal ambitions are reflected in its name, *opera* being the plural of *opus*, a work of art. The *OED*’s earliest recorded usage of the word to designate an artistic form, in 1639, describes it as “a composition in which poetry, dance, and music are combined.” In practice, the combinations were greater still; as the form spread throughout Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it came to encompass not only literature, drama, music, and dance but also, through set design, painting and sculpture. Yet the Renaissance opera strived not to *unify* so much as to *reunify* the arts, because its deliberate aim was to re-create the integrated form of the Greek tragedy from the scattered fragments of modern Western art.

Although the opera initially cast its gaze backward toward ancient Greece, its most ambitious practitioners sought to use the opera’s multimodal form to craft a new form of art that would in turn remake the world. The most determined to do so was Richard Wagner, the German composer who, along with Giuseppe Verdi, dominated opera’s nineteenth-century golden age. In his pamphlet *Art and Revolution* (1849), Wagner follows his operatic predecessors in seeing the form as a means of revitalizing Western art through a return to ancient precedents. After the fall of Greek tragedy, he argues, “the Drama separated into its component parts; rhetoric, sculpture, painting, music, &c. forsook the ranks in which they had moved in unison before; each one to take its own way, and in lonely self-sufficiency to pursue its own development.”<sup>9</sup> Though endorsing the aims of the first operatic composers, Wagner dismisses

their actual achievements: the first two hundred years of opera, he says, produced only “a foolish restoration of a sham Greek mode of art.”<sup>10</sup> Rather than a genuine unification of the arts, it was “an inane patchwork,”<sup>11</sup> a “chaos of sensuous impressions jostling one another without rhyme or reason.”<sup>12</sup> For Wagner, the Renaissance opera failed to grasp that Greek tragedy was more than a mechanical unification of the arts; it was also, in its place and time, a vehicle for unifying the public consciousness. In another pamphlet of 1849, *The Art-Work of the Future*, Wagner sees the potential for a perfected form of opera that would, through its balanced integration of the separate arts, serve as a model for a perfected polis. In such a form, he argues, “the separate artist, like each several art, must quell each selfish, arbitrary bent”;<sup>13</sup> by presenting a work in which “each separate branch of the arts” participates in “reciprocal agreement and co-operation” to deliver a “common message,” Wagnerian opera would serve as a formal symbol of the subordination of individual wills toward a common purpose.<sup>14</sup> In *Art and Revolution*, Wagner says that such a “united utterance of a free and lovely public” would stand as a “perfect Art-work.”<sup>15</sup>

Friedrich Nietzsche’s first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), is propelled by a manic enthusiasm for Wagner and Wagnerian opera. For Nietzsche, there was no question that Wagner had finally fused the arts. The consequences, he believed, would be world-historical. *The Birth of Tragedy* begins with a reinterpretation of Greek tragedy. For Nietzsche, the genius of the form rested on its perfect balance of two basic psychological impulses: the Apollinian and the Dionysian. Apollinian artworks, Nietzsche argues, are beautiful, ordered, and well proportioned: appealing to the audience’s desire for clarity and intelligibility, they impart a keen sense of individuality by drawing sharp lines between represented people and objects. Dionysian art, by contrast, inspires feelings of drunken rapture, transport, and awe; under its sway, Nietzsche writes, the spectator “feels himself not only reconciled, and fused with his neighbor, but as one with him.”<sup>16</sup> The singular achievement of Greek tragedy was to balance these warring psychological impulses – and this feat was possible only because of its multimodal form, in which music provided the Dionysian rapture and poetry the counterbalancing Apollinian clarity. According to Nietzsche, the downfall of the Greek tragedy came about through the triumph of what he calls “aesthetic Socratism”: the notion that “to be beautiful, everything must be intelligible.”<sup>17</sup> After Socrates, Apollo predominates over Dionysus in Western cultural history, which becomes increasingly preoccupied with “the desire for knowledge and the optimism of science.”<sup>18</sup> Like Wagner, Nietzsche dismisses the Renaissance opera’s attempts to re-create Greek tragedy: rather than balancing the two forces, he argues, its “rapidly changing endeavor to affect now

the concepts and imagination of the hearer, now his musical sense” was “intrinsically contradictory both to the Apollinian and Dionysian artistic impulses.”<sup>19</sup> In the Wagnerian opera, in contrast, Nietzsche perceives a genuine “rebirth of tragedy”<sup>20</sup> – a true reversal of the long dominance of “aesthetic Socratism” and a genuine “awakening of the Dionysian spirit in our modern world!”<sup>21</sup> Wagner’s achievement is not merely aesthetic but also political for Nietzsche: by uniting the two great streams of Western art and the two great human psychic impulses, Wagner promised the dawn of a new political era. More specifically, Nietzsche says – or rather, desperately *hopes* – that Wagnerian opera heralds the triumph of the German nation. In works such as *Tristan und Isolde*, “Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo; and Apollo, finally the language of Dionysus; and so the highest goal of tragedy and of all art is attained.”<sup>22</sup> Through such works, Nietzsche argues, lies the “renovation and purification of the German spirit.”<sup>23</sup>

Beneath Nietzsche’s dangerously overblown rhetoric lies an account of the social significance of multimodal art that remains relevant today. Nietzsche’s theory of the interaction of the Apollinian and the Dionysian remains relevant because it maps so neatly onto the McLuhanian analysis of print and electronic media. In McLuhan’s account, the psychic effects of print are recognizably Apollinian, fostering and privileging linearity, rationality, and individuality. The electronic media, by contrast, are decidedly Dionysian, encouraging participation and breaking down the barriers separating individuals. Few digital multimodal artists have been drawn to the grand historical arguments of Nietzsche and Wagner – the notion that new combinations of artistic media might usher in a new era of world history. Yet many more have been attracted to the notion that multimedia art holds the promise of balancing the Apollinian effects of print – its linearity and its focus on the concentrated individual reader – with the Dionysian character of modalities such as music and moving pictures. Though they may not expect empires to fall or be founded, the social change that such artists seek through cognitive reorientation is nonetheless real.

### Self-Reflexive Leitmotifs in *Inanimate Alice*

Among the most self-conscious recent attempts to employ the multimodality of the digital medium as a vehicle for literary expression is the *Inanimate Alice* series by Kate Pullinger and Chris Joseph. Launched in 2005, when it was envisioned as a ten-episode story arc, *Inanimate Alice* unfolds as a born-digital *Bildungsroman*, recounting the maturation of Alice through her

itinerant childhood. At the heart of the project is the collaboration between Pullinger – who, as a print novelist, received Canada's 2009 Governor General's Award for fiction – and Chris Joseph, an animator and multimedia artist. Pullinger has argued that storytelling comes first in their collaborative process; as she put it in a 2006 interview, "It's all about good stories, well-told, whatever the medium."<sup>24</sup> Yet a central goal of her collaboration with Joseph is to use the unique capacities of the digital medium to craft new kinds of narratives – to "us[e] the computer to tell stories in new ways."<sup>25</sup> Their work is motivated by their frustration with the popular e-book formats that function merely as "electronic replicas of books" – "paper under glass."<sup>26</sup> "If you are going to put a work of fiction on a computer," Pullinger asks, "why would you not use the multimedia components a computer has to offer you – image and sound and interactive games?"<sup>27</sup> *Inanimate Alice* responds by using them all. Asked which art forms *Inanimate Alice* employs, Chris Joseph lists "linear and non-linear fiction; generative and static art; electronic music; games; and some mashups of these that are still in search of suitable descriptions."<sup>28</sup> Yet embracing so many forms while still envisioning themselves primarily as storytellers has placed Pullinger and Joseph in an uncomfortable generic space. On the *Inanimate Alice* "About" page, labels proliferate: the authors call their work "born-digital," "interactive," "multimedia," and a "digital novel."<sup>29</sup> When *The Guardian* published "Episode 3: Russia" on its website in 2006, Pullinger wrote a post for its Books Blog titled "Fact is we need a better name for 'digital fiction.'" "It's tricky working in a genre that has no name," she wrote: "What would you call it?" she asks the *Guardian*'s readers. "Is it a kind of all-singing, all-dancing book? Is it a game? Is it a movie with text?"<sup>30</sup>

Reading (or "playing" or "viewing") *Inanimate Alice*, the reader (or "player" or "viewer" or "user") experiences for herself the discomfort of existing in the undefined spaces between art forms. "Episode 1: China"<sup>31</sup> is unsettling on several levels. The story is dark: Alice, eight years old and living in a remote oil station in northern China, discovers that her father is missing; she and her mother head out in a Jeep to search for him. The episode's multimodal form adds to the discomfort for a reader accustomed to print. Though the narrative is driven by first-person text in Alice's voice, it requires action from the reader to advance it: clicking on arrows, completing a simple game, and navigating the smartphone-like "Zeron" device on which Alice plays a game called ba-xi, records her diary, and has created a skateboarding cartoon figure she calls Brad. Although these user actions can have the effect of disrupting the flow of the narrative – one becomes, at times, more interested in clicking through and completing tasks than in reading Alice's thoughts – the more serious

challenge comes in the form of the digital animations and electronic music that accompany the text. Experiencing *Inanimate Alice* for the first time, I was reminded of Wagner's assessment of the early opera as a "chaos of sensuous impressions jostling one another without rhyme or reason."<sup>32</sup> The combined effect of the individual modalities was grating, as each distracted from the other rather than complementing it. The interactive games and the clicking interface kept me from lingering on the words, whereas the busy animations and cacophonous electronic music removed all possibility of entering a state of aesthetic contemplation. The total work was less than the sum of its parts.

Although the multimodal experience of "Episode 1" is occasionally unpleasant, this unpleasantness is nevertheless brilliantly acknowledged in *Inanimate Alice* through its "electrosmog" leitmotif. The backstory of *Inanimate Alice*'s engagement with "electrosmog" is peculiar. As Edward Picot has uncovered, *Inanimate Alice* was originally commissioned as a promotional vehicle for a device called the Electrosmog Detector, marketed by a company named Sensory Perspective.<sup>33</sup> In the artistic statement accompanying "Episode 1" in the first volume of the *Electronic Literature Collection*, Pullinger and Joseph state that the work was "created to help draw attention to the issue of electro-sensitivity and the potentially harmful pollution resulting from wireless communications."<sup>34</sup> "Episode 1" incorporates "electrosmog" as an aural motif that echoes throughout the work: the grating, buzzing, popping, static-filled sound many of us have heard after placing our mobile phones too close to an older, unshielded audio device, such as a radio or stereo system. The sound serves a double purpose in *Inanimate Alice*. On the one hand, perhaps in fulfillment of the authors' arrangement with Sensory Perspective, it brings attention to health concerns, though always obliquely, as when the sound fills the reader's ears as Alice writes, "The sky hums up here, I don't know why, as though it's electronic." More significantly, however, the electrosmog sound provides a self-reflexive symbol of the clash between old and new media. As one of the most grating and distracting multimodal effects in the work, the sound of electrosmog calls attention to its own obnoxiousness in order to turn the question back on the reader. Is the multimodal form of *Inanimate Alice* distracting or disorienting because of the work's inherent artistic failures, the motif implicitly asks – or is the problem rather that we come to the text with a set of anachronistic expectations derived from reading fiction in print? If electrosmog is the sound of a new medium clashing with an antiquated device, perhaps it is *us* – we readers who are not yet attuned to an emerging form – who are the antiquated device in question.

The inclusion of interactive game play in *Inanimate Alice* presents a similar challenge to readers accustomed to print. The type of interactivity in *Inanimate*

Alice is markedly different from that in either hypertext or Interactive Fiction (see Ch. 7). Rather than offering choices in a branching narrative or requiring user input to advance the narrative, each episode in *Inanimate Alice* tells an entirely linear narrative bereft of any choices: users simply click an arrow to advance to the next “lexia,” an action akin to turning the page in a printed book. Occasionally, however, we are required to complete a game to reach the next segment of text – as, for example, when we must photograph flowers with Alice’s Zeron player in “Episode 1.” Kate Pullinger has defended such games as a means of immersing her readers in the narrative. “As a reader, I’m not interested in choice,” Pullinger said in a 2006 interview: “I’m not interested in having to make decisions as I’m being told a story.” “The kind of gameplay in *Inanimate Alice*,” she explained, “is the kind of interactivity I’m interested in as it’s part of the story, not a diversion from the story.”<sup>35</sup> These ambitions are largely fulfilled in “Episode 1”: although the photography game is quite primitive, it succeeds in placing us in Alice’s perspective by having us capture the natural world with the Zeron device that mediates so much of her experience.

The gameplay in “Episode 3: Russia,”<sup>36</sup> by contrast, goes entirely against Pullinger’s characterization: it feels gratuitously tacked on to the story rather than meaningfully integrated into it. The narrative of “Russia” is even more menacing than that of “China.” Alice, now living in Moscow, hides in a closet as her father is berated by thugs and then joins her parents’ hasty flight from the country. As this narrative progresses, the reader plays a clumsy game called Matryoshka: in every chapter of the story, we are asked to locate a hidden matryoshka (a Russian nesting doll) that, once discovered and clicked on, falls from the top of the screen at increasing speed, to be captured by moving a small iconic representation of Brad, the skateboarding character from “Episode 1.” The image of the matryoshka dolls is again self-reflexive: here, one hopes, is gameplay perfectly nested inside an already deeply nested array of text, images, animations, and music. The actual gameplay falls well short of the promise of this harmonious image, however. To play the game well, we must devote most of our resources to looking for the obscured dolls, which makes it very difficult to pay attention to the story or the text. In direct contradiction to one of Pullinger’s stated ambitions, gameplay detracts – “diverts” – from the supposedly preeminent story. The self-reflexivity of “Russia” goes further, however. In the narrative context of the story, the Matryoshka game is the creation not of Pullinger and Joseph – but of Alice herself. Looking at a screen on Alice’s Zeron player, we are told early on, “I’m playing a game I made up – Matryoshka. I need to collect all the dolls in order to finish the game.” The same logic is repeated for the reader in “Russia”: to pass through a security checkpoint

at the airport and escape the country, Alice must show a guard that she has collected all the dolls, and if she fails to do so, we must return to earlier points in the story and collect the missing dolls. Recognizing that Alice is the author of Matryoshka unlocks the governing conceit of the *Inanimate Alice* series, in which each episode is presented as an autobiography – a multimodal narrative in which Alice is the author of both form and content. Borrowing a stylistic device from James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist of a Young Man*, the increasing complexity of each episode is intended to reflect Alice’s increasing skills as a game designer. *Inanimate Alice* is not just a digital-age *Bildungsroman*, then, but also a born-digital *Künstlerroman*: not merely a novel of development, but the story of Alice’s maturation as an artist, the stages of which are immediately visible to the reader as the episodes progress.

As a self-reflexive device, the authors’ Joyce-derived conceit has the effect of justifying the artistic shortcomings of *Inanimate Alice*, reminding readers that the form in which it is being produced is still in its infancy. If the Matryoshka game is primitive and distracting, that is only because Alice is still young and has not had the chance to develop fully as an artist. It is telling, however, that although ten episodes were originally envisioned for the series, only five have been released; Pullinger and Joseph released four episodes in the project’s first three years, and then paused for seven years before releasing the fifth. Pullinger and Joseph’s skills perhaps have simply not been able to keep up with those projected for their character Alice. If they envisaged the tenth episode as a decisive demonstration of the power of multimodal digital storytelling, it seems unlikely they will be able to deliver it. To date, their skills have only hinted at the medium’s potential. Still, we must recall that some two hundred years passed between the dawn of the opera and Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. By this logic, we may have to wait until the twenty-third century for the perfection of the form.

### A Dictatorial Stranglehold: Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries’ *Dakota*

*Inanimate Alice* strives to create a new literary form by surrounding a text-centered narrative with all the modalities of which the digital medium is capable. It goes out of its way, however, to present itself as a form in its awkward adolescence and to suggest that an audience of literary readers may not yet possess the interpretive machinery to engage fully with or even enjoy it. Balancing a commitment to formal innovation against the concern that treading new ground will alienate readers, Pullinger and Joseph are reminiscent

of modernists such as Virginia Woolf who, in a 1924 essay on Joyce and Eliot, argued, "We must reconcile ourselves to a season of failures and fragments. We must reflect that where so much strength is spent on finding a way of telling the truth, the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition."<sup>37</sup> By contrast, Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries *Dakota* – another prominent and much-discussed example of multimodal born-digital literature – invokes modernist literature to express an almost opposite intention. Their aim is not to excuse the "exhausted" or "chaotic" condition of the form, but to explode the very notion of multimodal born-digital literature.

Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries (YHCHI) – a Seoul-based collaboration between Young-Hae Chang and Marc Voge founded in 1999 – works in the genre generally called "Flash poetry": text heavy, music driven, temporally sequenced, and designed in Adobe (formerly Macromedia) Flash for viewing in a web browser. YHCHI's work has been widely published and exhibited in a range of venues that collectively attest to its permeation of the boundaries separating artistic forms: the Tate Modern, the Pompidou Center, the Whitney, *The Iowa Review Web*, and *Poemsthatgo.com*. YHCHI's *Dakota* (2002)<sup>38</sup> is formally representative of their multimodal oeuvre. It begins with a blank screen and the opening notes of "Tobi Ilu," a rhythmic instrumental track from jazz drummer Art Blakey's album *The African Beat* (1962). As the screen fades through shades of gray from black to white, Blakey's beat begins to kick in as we see a countdown sequence reminiscent of the early cinema. After this sequence is complete, text begins to flash by at a fixed and steady pace, in a huge, black, all-caps Monaco typeface. The first word of the poem proper, gyrating alone on the screen in all its manifest boldness, is "FUCKING." The narrative that unfolds is in two parts: first, we follow a group of friends on a drunken road trip through the Dakota Badlands; then, halfway through *Dakota*'s runtime, this storyline breaks down and we find ourselves in Seoul where *Dakota*'s authors present a series of local vignettes and metacritical reflections.

I must confess that when I first encountered it, I failed to recognize *Dakota*'s literary heritage and ambitions. I had begun a unit on born-digital fiction by asking students to bring to class any text fitting that description. One student suggested *Dakota*, and it proved extremely popular with the rest of the class, which was immediately drawn in by the music, the stylish and arresting presentation of text, and the energetically worded account of the trip in the Badlands. Though we all enjoyed it, neither the audience, the presenter, nor I recognized *Dakota*'s complex negotiation of literary history. As Jessica Pressman has shown,<sup>39</sup> *Dakota* is an intricately structured retelling of Ezra Pound's first and second *Cantos* – which in turn present an intricately

structured retelling of Homer's *Odyssey*, a foundational text of the Western literary tradition. The parallels between the works are overwhelming once you begin to look for them. Book 11 of the *Odyssey* describes Odysseus's journey into the underworld; this katabasis, retold in Pound's first *Canto*, is reproduced in *Dakota* when the drunken narrator converses with one of his dead friends. The name of the dead friend in question, Elie, echoes the Elpenor of Homer and Pound, one of the fallen comrades Odysseus meets in Hades. Tiresias, addressed with the apostrophe "O King" in Pound's *Canto I*,<sup>40</sup> reappears in *Dakota* as Elvis Presley, the king of rock 'n' roll. Just as Pound begins *Canto II*, "Hang it all, Robert Browning, / there can be but one 'Sordello,'"<sup>41</sup> YHCHI begin the second section of their narrative, "GØDDAMMITT, / ART BLAKEY, – NØ MIND/ HEARD – 'Ø' TINDE/ ØR – 'DINGA/ DINGA' – BEFØRE/ YØURS DID." Just as Pound acknowledges that he is reading Homer not in the original Greek but in a Latin translation ("Lie quiet Divus. I mean, that is Andreas Divus, / In officina Wecheli, 1538, out of Homer"<sup>42</sup>) YHCHI more crudely point out that they are reading *The Cantos* in an anthology ("FUCK – YØU, – ELLMANN, – THAT'S RIGHT – RICHARD – ELLMANN – NØRTØN – NEW YØRK, – 1973, – ØN – PØUND").

In an interview, Young-Hae Chang has stated that *Dakota* "is based on a close reading of Ezra Pound's cantos part I and part II"<sup>43</sup> – and as Jessica Pressman has confirmed, *Dakota* is a text that "invit[es] and reward[s] close reading."<sup>44</sup> Yet there is something strange and contradictory about *Dakota*'s relationship to close reading, a hermeneutic approach that the text both demands and forbids. Paradoxically, *Dakota* requires a form of attention – careful, alert, deep, concentrated – that its fast-moving, hyperactive, rhythmic form precludes. The text in *Dakota* passes by so fast that, as Pressman notes, "it is often impossible to read, let alone close read."<sup>45</sup> Further, the text to which *Dakota* refers – Pound's *Cantos* – is one of the most famously difficult in the English tradition. As the name-checked Richard Ellmann remarks in his prefatory notes to *The Cantos* in the 1973 *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, part of what makes Pound's poem so difficult is that it is not at all clear what sources he is subjecting to close reading: "The famous obscurity of the *Cantos*," he writes, "results partly from Pound's disjunctive arrangement of his materials, but partly from the obscurity of the materials themselves."<sup>46</sup> The concatenation of difficulty that lies beneath *Dakota*'s stylish and flamboyant exterior is truly dizzying.

Reading *Dakota*, one feels a bit like Alex undergoing the Ludovico Technique in *A Clockwork Orange*: head strapped in place, eyelids held open, images flashing by so quickly that they bypass the conscious mind completely. In *Dakota*, we are light years from the hypertext fantasy of a reader liberated by

the interactivity of the digital medium. Asked in an interview with *Dichtung-Digital* why their work incorporates no interactive features, YHCHI provided two reasons: "Because we don't know how" (they claimed to have mastered only the most basic functionality of Flash) and, more intriguingly, because "we would like our work to exert a dictatorial stranglehold on the reader."<sup>47</sup> *Dakota* recognizes the passive, dominated position of its reader within its last frames. With text flashing by faster than ever before, the authors depict a scene of eating jajangmyeon, a fast-food noodle dish that is best "WOLFED – DOWN – WITH – YOUR – HEAD – TILTED – LEFT – IF – YOU'RE – A – RIGHTY." The connection between literary and alimentary consumption is clear: as Pressman writes, just as "the reader struggles to absorb the text being hurled at her," she is "figured as literally eating a foreign substance speedily without identifying the food she ingests."<sup>48</sup> In their *Dichtung-Digital* interview, YHCHI argue that "digital media invite less thoughtfulness than analog media"; in the midst of the "tsunami of digital information on the Web," they suggest, it is increasingly difficult to find a still place for concentrated artistic contemplation.<sup>49</sup> *Dakota* criticizes this unsettling situation by reproducing it in amplified form: by constructing a richly meaningful, deeply literary narrative, yet delivering it in a tsunami-like digital medium that makes its meaning almost impossible to access. *Dakota*, as such, is a perplexingly divided work: a demonstration not only of the immense literary potential of multimodal digital art but of how out of place the slow, complex, historically interconnected literary text is in the fast, high-intensity, ahistorical universe of ones and zeros – how vulnerable Apollinian clarity becomes when it is placed within the pulsing, flashing stream of the digital Dionysian.

Both *Inanimate Alice* and *Dakota* come to us from the literary community: they are the products of serious writers and poets working in collaboration with serious visual and musical artists to develop new forms of art that incorporate the literary into a multimodal mixture. Yet both provide us with reasons to look beyond the literary community for alternate models of multimodal fiction. If *Inanimate Alice* succeeds artistically, it is not as a demonstration of the power of born-digital storytelling, but as a brilliant apologia: a subtle evocation of all the reasons why audiences are not ready to engage with such work and writers are not equipped to produce them. The primary artistic message of *Dakota*, likewise, is the impossibility of its digital form: a brilliant demonstration of how a loud and fast-moving multimodal presentation serves effectively to bury a complex literary argument that requires stillness and concentration for its comprehension. These two prominent examples of born-digital literature present us with deliberate dead ends: self-conscious and sophisticated "Check back later" signs. While we bide our time, then, we would do well to look beyond the literary community to a multibillion-dollar industry

that has been producing compelling, and wildly popular, multimodal born-digital narratives for several decades. It is time for us to ask an uncomfortable question: might videogames be the vessel in which the literary impulse will survive in the digital age?

## Are Videogames Literature?

### *Can a Computer Make You Cry? Videogames as Art and Narrative*

The June 1983 issue of *Creative Computing* magazine is in most ways an entirely typical document of the rabidly optimistic but relatively primitive computer scene of the early 1980s. The cover promises in-depth reviews of leading applications in the then-new field of word processing, and the accompanying illustration shows a small human figure tossing books, pencils, and bits of paper into a robotic brain. Among such bits of techno-nostalgia lies the most confident early assertion of the videogame's status as art form: an advertisement titled "Can a Computer Make You Cry?" It features a moody black-and-white photograph of seven men and one woman dressed in leather jackets and turtle necks, posed like an arty post-punk band or a group of neo-beat poets. "Why do we cry," the advertisement asks:

Why do we laugh, or love, or smile? What are the touchstones of our emotions?

Until now, the people who asked such questions tended not to be the same people who ran software companies. Instead, they were writers, filmmakers, painters, musicians. They were, in the traditional sense, artists.

We're about to change that tradition. The name of our company is Electronic Arts.<sup>50</sup>

The message of the advertisement was implicit in the new company's name: videogames were about to become a fully fledged art form. "The computer is more than just a processor of data," the ad read. "It is a communications medium: an interactive tool that can bring people's thoughts and feelings closer together." The advent of videogames had the potential to become more important than the arrival of cinema or television; videogames had the power, Electronic Arts claimed, to be "something along the lines of a universal language."

More than thirty years later, the videogames industry is more successful today than most would have predicted in 1983. At the time of this writing, videogames generate in excess of \$80 billion worldwide yearly; in the



United States alone, the industry grosses \$20 billion annually, more than double the domestic market for fiction. Yet videogames have failed to achieve the artistic recognition prophesied in the *Creative Computing* advertisement. James Newman attributes this lack of cultural recognition to a pair of widespread assumptions: first, that videogames are a children's medium, "easily and readily denigrated as trivial – something that will be 'grown out of' – and demanding no investigation"; and second, the sense that they are "mere trifles – low art – carrying none of the weight, gravitas, or credibility of more traditional media."<sup>51</sup> Since 1983, Electronic Arts has itself supplied some evidence to support these perceptions. Though it is today the third largest game company in the world, with annual revenues of nearly \$5 billion, its best-selling titles – sports franchises such as *Madden NFL* and *NBA Live*, first-person shooters like *Battlefield* and *Medal of Honor* – bear little relation to the high-brow masterpieces prophesied in its founding advertisement. Rather than striving to create anything as grand as a universal language, Electronic Arts – which tellingly now calls itself "EA," as if to mask its arty roots – exists today to entertain and to make money.

If the question "Are videogames art?" remains very much unresolved, the question "Are videogames literature?" is more vexed still. It was easier to perceive the literary inheritance of early videogames like *Adventure*, which were at least entirely text based; the connection is much less apparent in the multimodal blockbusters produced by today's videogame industry, in which text takes a back seat to visual design, animation, music, recorded dialogue, and sound effects. The most frequently asserted connection between videogames and literature is their shared status as narrative forms – yet this, too, has proven controversial. Citing storyless games such as *Tetris*, critic Jane McGonigal leaves narrative out of her definition of videogames in *Reality is Broken* (2011): "A compelling story makes a game more enticing," she argues, but is not necessary.<sup>52</sup> Setting aside games like *Tetris*, how do we deal with the large number of games that involve narrative elements such as characters, events, and plots? Most scholars in the burgeoning field of game studies have resisted the effort to view even such games through the lens of traditional narrative. In the inaugural 2001 issue of *Game Studies* – the first peer-reviewed academic journal in the field – Jesper Juul presents a pair of arguments against the narrative approach. First, echoing an argument raised in the debate over hypertext (see Ch. 7), Juul argues that the reader of literary narrative bears little similarity to the player of a game: whereas a reader exists wholly outside the narrative – peering in from the outside, as it were – a game player "inhabits a twilight zone where he/she is both an empirical subject outside the game and undertakes a role inside the game."<sup>53</sup> Second, Juul argues that time works differently in

games than in narratives. Whereas a narrative presents itself as a retelling of some already completed action, in a game, "the events are *happening now*" and "what comes next is not yet determined." For Juul, the interactivity of videogames means that they will never fit within the traditional confines of narrative: because "it is impossible to influence something that has already happened," he argues, "you cannot have interactivity and narration at the same time." In his own contribution to the inaugural issue of *Game Studies*, Espen Aarseth argues that we should approach videogames not as narratives but as "simulations": not as representations of some existing story, but as an alternate reality in which players are able to craft their own narratives free from the constraints and consequences of the real world.<sup>54</sup> Reframing this same idea through the *syuzhet/fabula* distinction of the Russian Formalists (see Ch. 7), H. Porter Abbott agrees that many videogames are more akin to an alternative life than to a narrative: "As in life," he says, "we are aware of something happening that has not been planned or written or scripted in advance – something making itself up as it goes along."<sup>55</sup> One is not told a story in such games; rather, one is presented with an arena in which to enact a story of one's own.

As with the hypertexts and Interactive Fictions encountered in the last chapter, however, the "second life" ideal presented by videogames is much easier to formulate in theory than to realize in practice. A truly open "simulated" word of the kind theorized by Juul and Aarseth is, alas, extremely difficult to design. The example of Emily Short's *Galatea* (see Ch. 7) is again instructive, for although we can ask *Galatea* many things and her answers depend on a number of on-the-fly considerations, our interactions are nevertheless extremely limited. We can only ask *Galatea* about the subjects she has been programmed to answer, and we can only ask them in language she understands. In every videogame, as in *Galatea*, we soon come to a point where our freedom to craft the narrative brushes up against the programmed limitations of the "simulation." At such points, we are thrown back into the world of traditional narrative. This situation is captured elegantly by Austin Grossman in *You: A Novel*, whose protagonist muses repeatedly on what he calls "The Ultimate Game":

There was still and always would be the problem of storytelling. You – you in the game – *should* wake up in a world with total choice. Go searching for a legendary jewel, stay home and make paper dolls, or run out into the street and punch a stranger in the nose. Somehow the computer copes. In a normal game, a real game, you couldn't do it. The world is a narrative channel, a single story that you can follow but never escape. Or maybe there's an open world, but only a specific range of



actions you can perform – you can punch a stranger in the nose but you can't talk to them; you can't make a friend or fall in love. Or you can talk to strangers but they can only say a few things – they're not really people, just shallow repositories of canned speech. At some point, sooner or later but usually very, very soon, the world just runs out of stories it can tell. And every time you run into that point, there's a jarring, illusion-breaking bump that tells you it's just a game.<sup>56</sup>

Although videogames possess the theoretical capacity to take us beyond the traditional boundaries of narrative, in practice they seldom do. However much theorists like Juul and Aarseth may wish to banish the concept of narrative from game studies, it remains a crucial, if occasionally unwelcome, element of the form. As inconvenient as it for game theorists, however, the persistence of narrative serves our own purposes better, because it provides a firm link connecting the world of literature to that of videogames and thus provides a basis for evaluating their suitability as a carrier of the literary impulse into the digital future.

### *Indie Games and the Future of Narrative*

There has never been a better time for readers of literature to think seriously about the videogame as an artistic form and a new vehicle for narrative. Although the field of game studies has produced excellent, perceptive studies of games such as *World of Warcraft*, *Doom*, and *Call of Duty*, such blockbuster games – often loud and violent, usually presenting predictable genre narratives – have failed to resonate with audiences accustomed to the quieter pleasures of *War and Peace*, the *Odyssey*, or *Mansfield Park*. However, the advent of “indie games” – an “arty” subgenre of games given to bold experiments in narrative – heralds a new rapprochement of videogames with the sphere of the literary. Indie games are plausibly the ultimate born-digital form. Not only are they, in the words of indie game designer Phil Fish, “the sum total of every expressive medium of all times, made interactive”<sup>57</sup> but they also take full advantage of all the liberating practical possibilities of digital production and distribution. The “indie” in indie games refers primarily to their independent production, a relatively novel option in gaming made possible by the development of online channels of distribution. Before the internet, most videogames were designed for consoles, such as the Atari 2600 or the Nintendo Entertainment System. To write for a console platform, developers had to pay an expensive licensing fee, arrange for the production of expensive game cartridges, and have these physical commodities distributed and sold in stores. The realities of console production, combined with the immense

technical difficulty of making a good game, meant that most games were produced by large teams in large studios. Because games were so expensive to produce and disseminate, the financial risks were considerable. Big studios developing for consoles thus tended to conservatism, sticking to the genres and narratives they knew would sell. Beginning in the early 2000s, however, two major developments spurred the emergence of indie games. Though games had been distributed on floppy disks and on the internet as “shareware” since the 1990s, services such as Apple's App Store and Valve's Steam made their distribution to mobile and computer platforms significantly easier. At the same time, the release of several sophisticated and easy-to-use new game creation tools – “game engines” such as Unity and Unreal – reduced the need for large, studio-based development teams. The result has been the creation of an alternative model of videogame production – one that resembles literary production much more closely. Rather than being developed in large teams that are commercially motivated to develop broadly palatable products, games can now be developed by individuals or small teams in pursuit of creative expression.

Though indie games have been produced in all the canonical videogame genres – first-person shooters, role-playing games, racers, real-time strategy, and so on – the most conspicuous indie games are those of a type that hardly existed in the console era: self-consciously “arty” or literary titles. As Jamin Warren notes, the label “indie game” has even come to designate not a method of production but a particular genre and style: in his words, “8-bit chiptune platformers with terrible gameplay that reflect on the existential reality of life.”<sup>58</sup> Whatever their stylistic consistency, the effect of indie games in the videogame world as a whole has been to add much-needed diversity. In *The Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, Anna Anthropy argues that because mainstream games are so difficult and expensive to make, they have tended to reflect the values of the restricted community that produces and consumes them – a community that is disproportionately young, white, and male. (Anthropy's assessment was lent considerable force by the Gamergate controversy of the mid-2010s, which underscored the entrenched sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia of the games community.) Although she finds many novels, films, and comics that speak to her experience as a queer transgender woman, Anthropy is unable to point to a single mainstream videogame that addresses her. She argues, however, that independent and amateur production – made possible by digital distribution and accessible game-creation tools – presents a possible way forward. Not only are “smaller games with smaller budgets and smaller audiences” more likely to be “more experimental or bizarre or interesting”<sup>59</sup> than big-budget games but they are also far more

likely to “come from a wider set of experiences and present a wider range of perspectives.”<sup>60</sup>

*Gone Home*, released in 2013 by the Fullbright Company, serves as a succinct demonstration of the artistic merits of indie games.<sup>61</sup> Presenting itself as “a story exploration videogame,” it offers an adventurous and recognizably “literary” narrative that pushes against conventional boundaries of videogame subject matter by centering on a coming-out story. The game’s production was typically “indie”: its three-person team, composed of two men and one woman, met while working on the acclaimed blockbuster *BioShock 2* and committed to develop a similarly sophisticated game entirely without violence. Living together in a rented house in Portland, they developed the game in the Unity engine. In *Gone Home*, we inhabit the first-person perspective of Kaitlin Greenbriar, who has returned home from a year abroad and whose family, in the meantime, has moved into a dilapidated mansion. Kaitlin enters the home on a dark and stormy night to find it entirely empty. Her task, and ours, is to find out what has happened – to piece together the narrative threads that will explain the unexpected emptiness of the Greenbriar home. The story we recover is of a sort familiar to readers of literature yet still extremely atypical of mainstream videogames: Kaitlin’s parents, trapped in an unhappy marriage, are at a marriage counselling session; her younger sister Samantha, having fallen in love with a female classmate and encountered the disapproval of her parents and peers, has run away from home. The precise manner in which we recover this story in *Gone Home* is markedly different both from literary fiction and mainstream games: we wander around the house, picking up letters and bits of paper, snooping through bookshelves, and listening to audio diaries recorded by Samantha. *Gone Home*’s method of storytelling is often extremely effective. We recover the entire backstory of Kaitlin’s father simply by poking around in his study: the boxes of unsold JFK conspiracy novels tell us that he is a writer fallen on hard times; a rejection letter from a publisher sits next to an empty bottle of whiskey, suggesting the consequences of his literary failures; an angry letter from his current employer, the reviews editor at a stereo equipment magazine, shows us how far he has fallen. “A whole life in boxes, in a single room,” as *PC Gamer* wrote in the article naming *Gone Home* their 2013 Narrative Game of the Year.<sup>62</sup>

At the same time, *Gone Home* ably illustrates the real difficulties that videogames present as vehicles for narrative. On the one hand, *Gone Home* seems to many literary readers too game-like. Although there are no monsters to kill and few puzzles to solve, the mansion’s locked doors, hidden keys, and secret passageways detract from any sense of genuine realism. On the other hand, even to inexperienced gamers, it may feel too limited in its interactive

possibilities to be satisfyingly game-like. Although there is some degree of freedom in the way we unfurl the story by moving around the house, there is clearly an “intended” route, which the authors prioritize through devices such as locked doors and hidden passageways. In this sense, the game is *too much* like print fiction: the story, the *fabula*, is already fixed, and we can have no impact on it; although we are responsible, to some extent, for the order in which this story is uncovered (the *syuzhet*), we are still left with only the rather limited options the developers grant us. When we open a work of print fiction, we do so with the tacit acceptance that both *fabula* and *syuzhet* are unavoidably fixed in advance by the author and that our role will be limited to that of “reader response.” In videogames, we know that affordances exist for allowing us to affect the narrative. When these affordances are not employed, the experience can feel disappointingly passive.

Another unlikely 2013 indie game sensation, *The Stanley Parable*, takes this narrative conundrum as its theme.<sup>63</sup> The basic scenario of *The Stanley Parable* is similar to that of *Gone Home*: Stanley, a downtrodden office employee, looks up from his desk one day to find that all his co-workers have disappeared, and he sets out to discover what has happened. The main formal innovation of *The Stanley Parable* is the inclusion of an intrusive narrator. At every step of the journey, the narrator’s affable voice interprets the action and provides clear suggestions for what course the player should pursue. As we approach a set of doors, the narrator says, “When Stanley came to a set of two open doors, he entered the door on his left.” Entering the left door and following all of the narrator’s subsequent suggestions leads to the game’s so-called freedom ending: we discover the company’s Mind Control Facility, we disable it heroically, and we are rewarded with an escape into a pastoral scene. If we disobey the narrator, on the other hand, he acknowledges our dissension and tries to steer us back onto the intended track. Entering the right door, we are told, “This was not the way to the meeting room, and Stanley knew it perfectly well.” If we linger in the patently uninteresting employee lounge, the narrator expresses his indignation with our refusal to follow the suggested course of his linear narrative. Eventually he says, “Stanley waited around for more dialogue, but when none came, he decided the game was trying to send him a message.”

Many endings are possible in *The Stanley Parable* if we disobey the narrator. In general, disobedience produces the most interesting stories. A particularly entertaining and self-reflexive outcome is the “confusion ending,” in which our repeated refusal to follow the narrator’s directions causes him to lose the narrative thread entirely. He repeatedly restarts the game in an effort to get his bearings, but simply cannot get back on track. After one restart, the narrator resorts to drawing a yellow line through the game – he calls it

"The Stanley Parable Adventure Line" – but even following this line leads nowhere. Restarting yet again, the narrator becomes briefly enthusiastic about the freedom that might come from being lost in the narrative: "Now, this is exciting! Just Stanley and me, forging a new path, a new story!" Again, however, we encounter no one and learn nothing. Finally, we are led into a room that reveals that all this confusion has, alas, been scripted in advance; laid out on a series of large screens is the developer's outline for "The Confusion Ending." As the narrator says elsewhere in the game, "every path you can walk has been created for you long in advance" – even the path of confusion. *The Stanley Parable* is, in effect, a game-long demonstration of the tension in videogames between granting players enough freedom to forge their own narratives while also keeping them on a meaningful narrative track. Although it provides an amusingly self-conscious demonstration of this tension, it stops well short of offering a solution. Rather than providing a way forward for videogames as a narrative form, it makes delightful fun of how far they still have to go.

### Instilling Mental Balance: *Superbrothers: Sword and Sworcery EP*

More constructive than *The Stanley Parable* is *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP*, a 2011 indie game originally released for the iPhone and co-developed by lead designer Craig D. Adams, musician Jim Guthrie, and independent studio Capybara Games.<sup>64</sup> *Sworcery's* narrative is simple and relatively threadbare: we are the Scythian, a warrior sent to the remote Caucasus region to save a village from an evil spell, and by solving a series of oblique puzzles and fighting several "boss battles" against triangular adversaries known as Trigons, we eventually achieve our quest, though we perish in the process. Whereas *Gone Home* and *The Stanley Parable* seek to prioritize, redefine, theorize, or criticize the place of narrative in videogames, *Sworcery's* main interest lies in achieving a careful *balance* between narrative and non-narrative elements. While the game was in development, Adams published a polemical essay on the webzine *Boing Boing* in which he outlines his vision of "the native language of videogames." Titled "Less Talk More Rock," the essay is, in one sense, literally a call for less "talk" in videogames – particularly in big-budget studio games, which Adams dismisses as "bloated cross media confections loaded with various kinds of talk and nonsense."<sup>65</sup> The problem with such confections, he argues, is their overemphasis on "disruptive, dissonant" narrative elements such as "overlong and condescending tutorials" and "over-explained idiotic stories." For Adams, the "magic" of videogames exists in underexplained,

intuitive moments in which "you are seeing things, hearing things, spotting patterns, flowing through spaces, experiencing moods and locations." When ham-handed narrative intrudes into such spaces, Adams argues, it has the damaging effect of "stirring our intellect, forcing us to switch gears and pay attention."

Adams's use of the word "intellect" suggests an affinity with Nietzsche's reading of Wagnerian opera – and indeed, the connection between Adams and Nietzsche is explicit. Just as Nietzsche celebrated Wagner's careful counterbalancing of Apollinian logic and Dionysian rapture, Adams argues for renewed balance in videogames between end-directed, intellect-driven narrative and directionless, exploratory gameplay. One of Adams's acknowledged sources for *Sworcery* is Leonard Shlain's *The Alphabet versus the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image* (1998), a bizarre scientific popularization of Nietzsche's Apollinian/Dionysian duality. Shlain, a neurosurgeon, equates the Apollinian with the left hemisphere of the brain (the verbal, time-keeping site of sequential processes like logic and narrative) and the Dionysian with the right hemisphere (the nonverbal, visual site of spatial processes such as pattern recognition). Drawing on McLuhan, Shlain presents a historical argument in which the spread of the alphabet – abstract, linear, sequential – prioritizes the left over the right brain. For Shlain, who genders the left brain male and the right brain female, the spread of alphabetic literacy goes hand in hand with the subjugation of women. With the dawn of multimodal entertainment in the form of television and computer games, Shlain sees the possibility for "a renewed respect for iconic information, which, *in conjunction with* the ability to read, can bring our two hemispheres into greater equilibrium and allow both individuals and cultures to become more balanced."<sup>66</sup>

Shlain's influence is palpable in many aspects of the game. The creators have cited him as the inspiration for their decision to give *Sworcery* a female protagonist<sup>67</sup> – a choice that feminist videogame critic Anita Sarkeesian has greeted as an "assert[ion] that women can fill the role of the mythic hero as effectively as men can."<sup>68</sup> Shlain also inspired *Sworcery's* effort to balance Apollinian "left-brain" linear narrative with Dionysian "right-brain" exploration and pattern recognition. The game is carefully egalitarian in its deployment of available modalities. Not only does it use text, images, animation, and music but its gameplay also makes each reactive to the other. Guthrie's adaptive score, for example, responds to the narrative, offering a happy tune for a moment of achievement or a grave one before battle. *Sworcery* balances narrative advancement against nonlinear exploration by developing innovative ways of slowing down its gameplay. Between each of the game's four "sessions," the player is

warned by the Archetype – *Sworcery's* narrator figure – not to move too quickly through the game's story: after Session One, he cautions, "Our research shows that prolonged exposure to the mythopoetic psychocosmology of S:S&S EP can have adverse side effects." The game's signature device is another delaying technique. To advance from one level to another, we must wait for particular moon phases: only when there is a full moon in the real world can we enter the game's Bright Moon Phase and recover the Bright Moon Trigon; we must then wait a few weeks, for a new moon, to make our attempt on the Dark Moon Trigon.

Such devices ask players to set aside their usual compulsion to make their way as quickly as possible through the game's narrative – to "beat" the game – inviting them instead calmly to explore its sounds and spaces. Likewise, *Sworcery's* gameplay encourages "right-brain" pattern recognition and Dionysian transport even while advancing the game's "left-brain" sequential plot. Moving through the game's later sessions requires us to release a number of Sylvan Sprites, a task accomplished not through combat but by solving oblique audio-visual puzzles that reward intuitive exploration. In one sequence, we must learn to play waterfalls like strings on a guitar; in a forest scene, we are asked to notice subtle visual discrepancies between the woods and the image they reflect in a nearby pool. Any attempt to blast quickly past such obstacles results only in frustration; to solve the puzzles successfully, we must achieve a mental state of almost meditative serenity. Although each session culminates in a conventional "boss battle," these battle sequences also work to instill sensory equilibrium. Experienced gamers would no doubt have little trouble defeating the Trigons – dodging lightning blasts, avoiding triangular projectiles, engaging in extended ping-pong battles with rays of energy. Yet for novices, the only way to succeed is by relaxing and listening to the music, which contains implicit cues for when to dodge and when to strike. We graduate to the next level only when we have learned to achieve the requisite mental balance.

In *Persuasive Games* (2007), videogame critic Ian Bogost argues that the most powerful native form of expression in videogames is what he calls "procedural rhetoric." Although Bogost has no doubt that videogames are an art form and "an expressive medium,"<sup>69</sup> he argues that they achieve their effects in a manner distinct from all the other arts. Rather than simply presenting their audience with words, images, or moving pictures, Bogost argues, videogames achieve their rhetorical force through "rule-based representations and interactions." To convince its audience of a particular social ill, a film or a novel would describe it in a persuasive fashion; a videogame, by contrast, would not merely describe the problem but would also have its player *act it out*. For Bogost, "the very way videogames mount their claims through procedural rhetorics" has

the power to "disrupt and change fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world."<sup>70</sup> We can see this power in a game like *Sword & Sworcery*. Whereas writers such as Nietzsche, McLuhan, and Shlain describe and argue for the importance of achieving a balance among linear, logical, and individualistic modes of thought and intuitive and communal ones, *Sword & Sworcery* presents itself as a framework in which that mental balance can be actuated in the player. For Craig D. Adams, *Sworcery* is a very deliberate exercise in procedural rhetoric: to play it successfully is to act out the psychic recalibration it seeks to achieve.

*Sworcery's* ambitions are clearly hyperbolic and likely unrealistic: though several million people have downloaded and played the game, we have no way of measuring its disruption of "fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world."<sup>71</sup> Yet this very over-ambitiousness provides the strongest link we possess between indie videogames and the literary tradition. If there is a trait held in common between the literary writers and thinkers we have encountered in this volume – Woolf, Benjamin, Blake, Dickinson – it is an earnest faith, sometimes to the point of absurdity, that new forms of expression have the power to change the world. "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans,"<sup>72</sup> wrote Blake in *Jerusalem*, an illuminated prophetic text that Blake intended, like all his prophetic works, to usher in a new phase of human perception. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf noted that, by the time women were granted the freedom to write, "all the older forms of literature were hardened and set in place." "The novel alone was young enough to be soft in her hands,"<sup>73</sup> and so it was to the novel that she devoted herself. Today, it is the form of the videogame that is most malleable and most amenable to the shaping touch of a new generation of ambitious artists. With few rules in place, with growing access to independent creation and distribution, and with the expressive language of "procedural rhetoric" on their side, videogame artists possess a powerful toolkit. Let's pay close attention to what they do with it.